

Los Angeles Valley College: The First Year

AS TOLD BY DR. JAMES DODSON ON 6-5-77
(revised 12-11-86)

This is Dr. James L. Dodson, curator of the L.A.V.C. Historical Museum. The date is June 4, 1977. Some years ago I was asked by Dr. Dallas Livingston-Little, coordinator of the College Placement Office, to record my impressions of the early history of the college. The following is an account I wrote of the founding of the college: Its first year of operation.

I might add that I was asked to undertake the project because I have been associated continuously with the college from its founding in 1949 to the present time. In fact I began work as a counselor two weeks before the college officially opened, which gave me the distinction, which I confess I have always valued, of being the first regular member of the faculty to begin work at L.A.V.C. Of course the three administrators had already begun to function before I was engaged as a counselor and as an instructor in History.

What follows then is my account of operations of the college:

You, are charter members of Valley College.

Our college is destined to be one of the largest junior colleges in southern California in a few years. Isn't it exciting and challenging to reflect that the traditions you establish will form the foundations of the college of tomorrow.

You will name the school, name your paper, choose your colors and student body name. More important than all this, you will establish the attitude and influence the character of students for years to come. Newcomers tend to adopt the general characteristics of established groups. More so than you realize, you affect the behavior patterns for Valley College. What a heritage will be theirs for future students, if this group faces tomorrow with courage and hope. You are plowing through the dust and making light of limited facilities. Would you accept this cheerfully, the difficulties of study? Would you compensate for handicaps and make them serve your future growth? From the difficulties, the strains, and stresses of pioneering a new college, a bigger, better, stronger institution will emerge. Valley College is on the threshold of a glorious future.

With these words in Volume 1, Number 1 of an as yet unnamed student paper, Director Vierling Kersey, on October 7, 1949, welcomed and challenged the first student body of Valley College, a student body of 254 men and 185 women, double the anticipated 225.

The sincerity of both welcome and challenge were immediately apparent. The fledgling college was located on what had been the agricultural plot of Van Nuys High School. Five bungalows formed the physical plant though two more were soon added and others were under construction.

Asphalt would eventually be laid, but until then students and faculty would plow through dust in dry weather and mud in wet weather. Fortunately a row of black walnut trees was left standing to provide the first landscaping. Much needed assistance was rendered by the high school which contributed offices for college administrators, classrooms for students and instructors, and a room adjacent to their own library for Valley's book collection, 150 volumes, most of which had no bearing on the classes taught.

The pioneer class was faced on opening day September 12, 1949, by a pioneer faculty which originally consisted of three administrators and eighteen instructors, though this number was augmented by additional instructors before the end of the school year.

Dr. Kersey, formerly state superintendent of public instruction and superintendent of Los Angeles City Schools, became the first director, the title then used instead of the current title of president. Assistant directors were Walter Coultas and Mrs. Nina Royer. Mr. Coultas' previous career in the Los Angeles Unified School District had included such positions as Vice Principal at Verdugo Hills High School, assistant supervisor in charge of counselor training, and supervisor of vocational guidance. Mrs. Royer had been a Vice Principal at Belmont High School for the preceding ten years.

Unlike the administrators, most of the faculty were experienced college instructors. A number had held college

posts in other L.A. County institutions, some in four year colleges in universities in other states. Some were drawn from assignments in the L.A. City schools. Whatever their backgrounds, all were united in the sentiment expressed by a student reporter by Dr. James Dodson, instructor in history and Valley's first counselor, when he said,

I am entering upon this job with more enthusiasm than any previous teaching assignment, because it represents a chance to participate in a small way in the building of a new college.

The student body wasted no time in forming themselves into an organized group. Elections were held on September 29th and 30th with runoffs on October 3rd and 4th. Gene Stauffer defeated Pat Mulholland to become the first president of the associated students, while Paul Sanker became vice president. The offices of secretary and treasurer were filled by Shiley Holt and Gene Peters respectively. The presidency of the Associated Women's Students went to Polly Tavss, and to the Associated Men's Students, Mel Wawrach.

Some were critical of the fact that only 60% of the student body voted. Could they have seen the future they would have rejoiced. This was probably the high water mark of all Valley College student elections.

That students would formulate the traditions of the new college was no idle pronouncement. Even before the first election of officers, a ballot was taken on school colors, green and gold were the winners. On October 12, the student body chose as its nickname, Monarchs. The contenders for the honor had been Great Danes, Rancheros, and Bobcats. The

last name was discarded because, as the student paper put it, the bobcat is a cowardly sneaky beast, and subsequently we could be tagged the same.

Another problem was naming the school paper whose first issue appearing on October 7th had its flag title page decorated with question marks. Although the lack of a name seemed no handicap to the first editor in chief Ray Cluff, his managing editor Bob Thomas, his staff, nor to the journalism department, it seemed best to remedy the lack as quickly as possible. Students were invited to submit names from which the newspaper staff chose three for submission to a vote. On the first ballot, "Monarch News" led with 67 votes, "Valley Star" had 62, and "Crown Press" came in last with 41. In a runoff election, "Valley Star", suggested by George Berger, retained its 62 supporters while "Monarch News" drew only 41. The new name appeared for the first time on the newspaper edition of November 4th. That it was eminently satisfactory to the staff was shown by the first page eulogy Of Ella Cass, feature editor,, who wrote, "Valley symbolizes our college. Whenever the word "Valley" is spoken, the students at Valley feel the thrill of belonging. "Star is more than a press name. It indicates leadership, idealism, optimism, positivism. "The Valley Star" has a musical rhythmical sound. It is easy to say a produces a warm, friendly, satisfactory effect emotionally."

An official college seal was needed and again students were asked to submit suggestions. The winning idea was submitted by art major, Pat Perry, whose preliminary sketch

showed a book of knowledge with a lighted lamp of learning, a winged foot for sports and activities, and a shield with the name, "Monarchs" engraved on it. The founding year, 1949, would also appear as would the official name, Los Angeles Valley College. The final version was not, however, to be approved until April, 1951, and was a combination of the ideas of Miss Perry and Miss Marie Scott, instructor in art. Miss Scott's design incorporated a shield on which appeared a tree of learning growing through a book, and below which were the Spanish words for truth, justice, culture whose first letters in Spanish spelled out V.J.C. The Spanish was deemed appropriate because the permanent college buildings were to be in the Spanish Colonial style. Surmounting the shield was a large "V" holding a crown on which was inscribed, 1949.

No college is complete without clubs. First to be organized and officially recognized was the Christian Fellowship Club whose founder, Glen Parish, presided over the initial meeting on October 19th. Present were the founders, five charter members, and the faculty advisor, Mr. James Smith. Soon to follow were the two service organizations: The Knights for men and the Coronets for women. Bob Lundsford, organizer and first president of the Knights, declared as their goal to give service to the college in any way they could. "Our first effort will be to help keep the student union clean. We also plan to get refuse cans to place on the campus to help keep it unlittered. We will serve as ushers at games, dances and assemblies. Absentees will be

aided in getting assignments and returning papers to instructors." The Coronets, whose aims were similiar, were headed by Diane Murphy. A large share of credit for the organization of these two service clubs was due their first officers and their first faculty advisors, Phil Clarke and Velma Olson.

The only sports in which Valley could immediately participate were cross country and basketball. On December 2nd, Coach E.Y. Johnson took his small group of leather lungers to compete in a meet with East Los Angeles. Although Valley was beaten, John Garcia captured third place, Don Hoover and Jimmy Smith eighth and ninth place respectivly for the Monarchs. The same week saw the first victory in basketball when the green and gold under Coach Ben McFarland took the measure of the Van Nuys Missionary Church 61-57. Coach Johnson's baseball squad got off to a good start in March 1950 when Valley won its first two games against the City College Cubs. Then followed on March 10th its first metropolitan conference win 2-1 against San Diego.

It must be said, however, that Valley's first year of sports competition was not an unqualified success. The basketball team won five games while losing thirteen. In baseball, Valley won three of its conference games, while losing seven. Fortunately, the results were exactly reversed with non-conference opponents. So the record would show the season completed with ten wins and ten losses. Some satisfaction could also be taken in the naming of Pete Nitrini

and Ronnie Gurst to all the metropolitan conference nine.

In track, Coach Charlie Mann's squad placed sixth in the metropolitan conference standings. Tennis proved a disaster with Valley College winning only one contest.

In passing from the somewhat sublime to the somewhat ridiculous, it may be said that the administration favored the fraternizing of students and faculty on the athletic field. The first result was a basketball between faculty and Knights. According to the newspaper account, "Iron Man" Ben McFarland led a ferocious faculty fivesome of himself, Phil "Philandering" Clark, Walter "Long Arms" Coultas, and Ernest "Unconditioned" Johnson to a 32-13 win. Subs for the victorious profs were "Soccer Fan" Paolino, "Bulldozer" McNelis, and "Goose" Tatum. The faculty cheering section was ably and uniquely led by Vierling Kersey. Unfortunately for the faculty, the Knights now saw fit to challenge them to baseball. Once again it seemed for a time that the senior citizens might win. It was not to be. Their ace righthander, "Iron Man" Mann was blasted from the mound in the last inning for seven runs on five hits and a deluge of faculty miscues. Even the spectacular catches made by outfielder, Joe Nordman, who coolly calculated the density of air and falling objects, failed to turn the tide. The academicians lost by 15-13. Perhaps it is well that in the long run these encounters did not establish a lasting tradition.

If Valley was to have athletic teams, it was also to have song and yell leaders. Chuck Moran was given the

imposing title of "Yell King," while Johnny Duncan and Kenny Thompson became his assistants. Valley's first song leaders were Jean Marcy, Pat Perry, Sally Crasweiler, and Virginia Marsillio. Judging from the past high school experience of members of the two groups, Valley students would have excellent yelling and singing leadership regardless of prowess of their athletic teams. That leadership might at times be wasted, however, was shown by the fact that the pep rally to inaugurate Valley's first baseball season was attended by yell leaders and song leaders, the team, and exactly ten others. Perhaps it was an omen that the Valley student body would not show the obsession with intercollegiate sports that seemed in the public mind to dominate student bodies of most colleges.

Song leaders found their assignment somewhat difficult without any accompanying music. To remedy this defect the music department, Mr. Al Caligiuri, and Chuck Moran, campaigned to recruit musicians for a band. Their efforts were finally rewarded by the formation of the first Valley College Band in February, 1950. The twelve member organization was not the largest, possibly not even the most tuneful, in the Metropolitan conference. At least it made up, however, in zeal for what it might lack in some other particulars.

While students were making plans, selecting names, and establishing traditions, the faculty was not idle. The first faculty organization was adopted with Don Prismon president, Mary Jo Wood secretary, and Bob Davis treasurer.

Kermit Dale and Bob Davis were named representatives to the L.A. College Faculty Association. One of President Prismon's first acts was to appoint a constitution committee consisting of Dr. Dodson, chairman, Blanche Bloomberg, and James Smith to draw up a permanent organization plan. This committee, on which Everett Jenks replaced Mr. Smith in 1950, was destined to be the first relatively permanent faculty association committee and to retain, twenty-five years later, two of its four members; Dodson, having served continuously as chairman during that period, and Mr. Jenks, having served as senior member. In the intervening quarter century it would write two faculty constitutions, a number of amendments, and deliver advisory opinions on constitutional questions.

A problem of pressing importance to faculty and students alike was the permanent location of the new college. This matter seemed settled as early as October 1949, when Superintendent of Schools, Stoddard, announced the selection of a forty-five and one-half acre site bounded on the west by Woodman Avenue, on the north by Chandler Boulevard, on the south by Magolia Boulevard, and on the east, by unimproved land.

The beauty of the site and its convenient location led to immediate approval by both faculty and students, along with that of the North Hollywood, Van Nuys, and Sherman Oaks Chambers of Commerce, plus a number of residents in the immediate vicinity. Unfortunately, however, the approval was not unanimous, strong protest being registered by a

few affected property owners. It was not the wish of college authorities that the new institution should begin its life with a fight over land condemnations. The project was abandoned and the second choice, a plot bounded by Fulton Avenue, Burbank Boulevard, Coldwater Canyon Boulevard and Oxnard Street was chosen instead.

Officially the reason for the change was the small acreage of the Woodman location. In the end, the change proved to have been a wise one. The type of architecture ultimately adopted for Valley was wasteful of space in the opinion of some but could not have been adapted to the Woodman site. Along with the discarding of the original site selection, however, was the discarding of the original plan for the architecture of the college. It had been intended that the college should be in the Spanish Colonial style which would have been in keeping with the traditions of the Valley. A change would be made, however, in favor of what was, or what was officially designated as Ranch Style. In this was, it was hoped to erect more buildings with less money.

The second semester saw a healthy growth in the student body and faculty. The former almost doubled in size with 667 day students, 236 evening students. The latter was augmented with the addition of thirteen new instructors, Frances Cochranides, Dr. Sidney Kessler, Mr. Charles Locks, Mr. Charles Mann, Mr. Joseph Nordmann, Mr. Leonidas Paolino, and Miss Jeanne Pons would still be on the staff a quarter of a century later. The new arrivals

were welcomed by the new student and faculty officers. Bob Lunsford replaced Gene Stauffer as president of the student body while Mike Seeger became vice-president, Michelle Arons, secretary, and Bob Wegener, treasurer. Nick Giordano and Joan Haas became presidents of the Associated Mens Students and the Associated Womens Students, respectively. For the faculty, Bob Davis took over the presidency with Blanche Bloomberg, vice-president, Mary Jo Wood, secretary, and John Wynnns, treasurer. New editor of the Valley Star was Ella Cass who perhaps sounded best the key note to welcome new students in her editorial of February 3, 1950:

Welcome Newcomers! As you enter Valley College, you will perhaps be inclined to ask, (as we did), "where is it, and what is it?" These few buildings are no true indication of the college itself. Within these bungalows, you will meet the friendliest administration, faculty, and student body, to be found anywhere. You will be offered a well rounded schedule, planned to meet your needs as you prepare to face the challenge of the modern world in buisness, culture, and technical life. You will have capable instructors and adequate opportunity for preparation and practice.

You are being given a proud name and an equally distinctive heritage of traditions. We students of Valley have chosen to be called "Monarchs", not alone for what we are, but also ✓

for what we are to become.

It is true that we have faced inconveniences and inadequate facilities, but these have been outweighed by the joy of fellowship and the thrill of accomplishment we have known. We are proud too, of the record made by our athletes, who have won several basketball games during their first season. We have clung to the tradition of good sportsmanship and high idealism throughout our short life.

This is Valley, and the heritage which we would share with you. Accept our hand of fellowship and know that you are welcome. As weeks fade into months, and the strangeness wears off, we trust that you will come to cherish this college which we are building. May you experience the friendliness we have known and thrill to the opportunity for service and scholarly training in the American tradition.

We would share with you our dreams...dreams of the huge campus, athletic plant, stadium, modern classrooms, and equipment, that will someday be ours. You are part of us now, and we are looking forward to the expanding horizons which are part of our growth.

New services too, were developed for the second semester.

Mr. William McNelis and Miss Mary Bruick were assigned the

establishment of a job placement office. An evening division was organized to serve the needs of those unable to attend day sessions. Mrs. June Biermann, then Miss June Adams, actually Valley's first librarian without the official title, now qualified for the title. Her first book collection of about 150 volumes had been ordered by Assistant Director Coulter who directed the downtown library to send us a duplicate of anything ordered by Harbor College. Unfortunately, Harbor was primarily interested at the time in technological courses. Valley had no such courses or means of teaching them so books on marine engines had little immediate use. Nevertheless, from this modest beginning would be built in a quarter of a century, a library of some 100,000 volumes, one of the nation's best junior college libraries.

The second semester also saw, in March, the first Theater Arts Department production, "All My Sons." Theater Arts instructor, Bob Davis, and his cast headed by Barr Sarkissian, Ann Gregorio, Dick Reynolds, Beverly Zanoline and Barbara Price, overcame the problems presented by the lack of any satisfactory facilities. This they did through the device of central staging, that is, acting in the center of the floor surrounded by tiers of seats. So successful was the initial presentation, that plans were made to present in June, "The Male Animal" with Dick Gifford and Dick Reynolds in the leads.

The social side of college was not neglected during the first year. The first Christmas dance had been held at the Riviera Country Club on December 23, 1949. Valley's

first queen, Michelle Arons, and first king, Bob Seaner, were crowned the following March. On May 5th, the first dance ever held on the Valley College campus took place in the new College Hall. The year closed with a formal dance at the Riviera Country Club. Between these events, a constant round of parties and teas given by students had taken place.

Valley's first year ended with the establishment of precedents which was hoped to make of the institution a college, not a post-graduate high school. Administrators adopted a wise policy of noninterference with the conduct of classes, though on rare occasions pressure would be exerted to have an individual's grade changed, a sure method of provoking friction between administration and faculty. Within a short time, however, administrators realized the counter productivity and lack of professionalism of this practice and gave it up.

The incessant reading of bulletins characteristic of some junior and senior high schools but not of four year colleges was largely discarded, a tradition due in large part to Assistant Director Coutas. The issuance of large numbers of relatively useless communications from administration to faculty and individual faculty members to their colleagues was also discouraged. Unfortunately, this precedent would be shattered in later years as a mighty flood of papers descended on the teaching staff.

A suspending of classes for everything or nothing, again a characteristic of some secondary schools, was forbidden at Valley. Instead, the administration accepted

the suggestion of Dr. Dodson that a freee hour be established at 11:00 Tuesday and Thursday to accomodate all sorts of extracurricular activity.

On the negative side from the faculty point of view was the inauguration during the first year of college operation of the system called cross-fielding, a system much favored by Director Kersey and in which an instructor was encouraged to teach subjects in which he was not fully competent. Fortunately, cross-fielding was given up, much to the relief of the faculty and to the benefit of the students.

This account of Valley's first year would not be complete without some additional mention of the ideas and philosophy of its founding father, Dr. Vierling Kersey, perhaps the most colorful of all its chief executives. Many ideas were unique, some were unpopular, some were amusing, all were interesting. On buildings for the new campus, for example, Dr. Kersey believed that nonessential buildings should come first, because the essential ones would have to be provided later, wheras if the essential ones came first, the nonessentials might never be built. unfortunately his idea was not followed with the result that Valley, for example, never aquired an auditorium.

On seating for meetings, Dr. Kersey believed that there should always be at least one seat too few so that the room would give the appearance of being crowded.

On evaluating faculty, the director applied his

own somewhat different standards. According to Dr. Fred Machetanz, Director Kersey is said to have called in for evaluation Dr. Roy Beaumont, an instructor known for challenging, if not shocking, his students, and told Roy of the highly favorable reports coming in about his teaching, students and parents alike praising him highly. Roy went out happy that he had received the highest possible rating. Several days later he encountered Walter Coulter, the assistant director, and asked about his rating. "You were rated average," said Coulter. Roy hit the ceiling, stormed into Kersey's office, and demanded an explanation. If everyone praised him so highly, why was he rated only average? "Well," said Dr. Kersey, "you didn't attend any football games. "By that criteria," answered Roy, "Socrates and Jesus Christ would only have been rated average." "True," said Kersey, "and they don't teach at Valley."

The first year ended with the realization in large part of Director Kersey's dream of an atmosphere of friendliness among the students, faculty, and administrators. The foundations had been laid to make his slogan, "the friendly college," a reality. On the academic side, instructors believed they had created the nucleus of a real college, not a post graduate high school. These factors, except perhaps for the soon to be discarded crossfielding, contributed to the development of a high morale which would be the wonder of future accrediting teams composed of educators from other institutions. It can truly be said that the first year of operation of the college was in every sense a success.